

Once-a-day keeps costs down

Once-a-day milking is an effective way to minimise production costs, according to Tasmanian dairy farmers Matt and Pip Gunningham.

The Gunninghams milk 760 spring calving cows once a day in a 40 a-side swingover on their Mawbanna farm in North West Tasmania.

Once-a-day milking has helped them reduce their labour costs, reduce their need for purchased feed, cut cow wastage and enabled them to make better use of their paddock feed and facilities.

When the Gunninghams moved to Tasmania from the UK eight years ago, they started with 300 cows milked twice a day with the aim of increasing their herd size.

Six years ago they had the opportunity to continue expanding their herd by purchasing an adjoining 100ha.

But the paddocks in the new block were about 4kms from the dairy and the Gunninghams had to reconsider their milking options.

“It was just too far to get the cows to walk to twice a day,” Matt said. “We looked at the various options – such as building a new dairy or changing our milking pattern.”

Part of the Gunningham’s research involved investigating once-a-day milking which was being practised on a number of New Zealand dairy farms at the time.

“Once-a-day milking gave us a lower risk option and didn’t involve us making substantial investments in infrastructure which would depreciate. It sat

well with our aim of wanting a simple, low cost business,” he said.

The Gunninghams increased their herd size to 570 cows and decided to try once-a-day milking on a portion of the herd for part of the season.

At the end of December the herd was split in two and about 200 Jersey and crossbred cows drafted off. These cows became the ‘once-a-day herd’ and were used to graze the paddocks on the new block.

The balance of predominantly Friesian cows stayed on twice a day milking. Both herds were milked in the morning, but only the Friesians were milked in the afternoon.

“We originally had concerns that the Friesians wouldn’t cope with once-a-day milking, but in hindsight we were wrong – any cow can handle once a day as long as you don’t push for high peak production,” Matt said.

“We’re happy for our cows to peak at 17-18L/day which means we don’t have issues with fresh cows.”

Matt noticed dramatic changes in the once-a-day herd straight away. The cows were more relaxed and their grazing behaviour was less aggressive because they spent more time in the paddock.

“We calculated the differences between the two herds and found that the once-a-day herd spent the equivalent of three weeks less time walking and standing in dairy yard, than the twice a day cows,” he said.

“They needed less energy and had a reduced cost of production per litre. They did



drop 20 per cent in production per cow when we went to once-a-day milking, but we’re not interested in per cow production because we focus on profit per hectare.”

The following season the Gunninghams started the whole herd on once-a-day milking and have subsequently increased cows numbers to 760 head.

Their cows are now in better condition at drying off and have improved fertility rates with 95 per cent in calf after a 10 week joining. Cows come into oestrus strongly after calving, leading to more cows getting in calf to the AI program.

The reduced walking has cut the incidence of lameness. Fewer lame cows and higher conception rates have reduced the cull rate in the herd – enabling the Gunninghams to build up herd numbers.

Matt and Pip still split their herd in two, but both are milked consecutively in the morning. A herd of about 400 younger, fitter cows grazes the paddocks furthest from the dairy while a herd of older cows grazes nearer the shed.



“Once-a-day milking has improved our pasture utilisation because we now move the cows when they’ve finished the paddock, rather than at milking.”

Matt says once-a-day milking involves a definite change in mind set.

“It’s not going to suit everyone but is certainly worth considering if you have a dairy which isn’t big enough, or your business is going through a stage where you need to increase cow numbers.”